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SUBJECT: JERUSALEM MEDIA REACTION (01/19): President Abbas continues to refuse negotiations with Israel without a full freeze on settlement activity

Main Stories:

The dailies report that recent Israeli excavations beneath the Al-Aqsa mosque are the cause of the latest collapse in the Wadi Hilweh neighborhood of Silwan in East Jerusalem. The Palestinian Authority (PA) expects more collapses in the area due to continued Israeli excavations. Jerusalem Mufti Mouhammad Hussein urged the international community to put pressure on the Israeli authorities to halt the excavations under the mosque.

Independent daily Al-Quds leads with news on houses in Gaza affected by floodwaters yesterday. Civil defense forces in Gaza evacuated a number of families from their homes in Gaza City.

Independent daily Al-Ayyam reports that Special Envoy George Mitchell will arrive in Beirut today for a two-day visit to discuss regional peace efforts.

The dailies front page news of PA President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad participating in the Armenian Christmas celebration in Bethlehem yesterday. Abbas is quoted in the PA official daily Al-Hayat Al-Jadida reiterating that the PA will continue its efforts towards achieving peace.

In its weekly meeting yesterday, the cabinet approved sending humanitarian aid to Haiti. The cabinet also urged the Quartet and the US to exert pressure on Israel to stop continued settlement activities.

Weekend stories:

Monday, January 18

PA official daily Al-Hayat Al-Jadida leads with news on President Abbas calling for greater European pressure on Israel to freeze settlement activity since the US backed off from calling for a full settlements freeze.

The dailies report that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak stated that Egypt submitted suggestions to resume peace talks between Palestinians and Israelis, which are currently being reviewed by the US. Mubarak also stressed that the Palestinian state of division has to end, saying that it only serves the Israelis, giving them more time to contract new settlements.

Sunday, January 17

The three dailies run front page stories highlighting statements by President Abbas rejecting any return to peace negotiations before Israel completely freezes settlement activities in the Palestinian territories, including Jerusalem. Abbas also said he will not meet with Hamas before the group signs the Egyptian plan for Palestinian reconciliation.

In related news, Al-Quds and Al-Ayyam quote French sources stating that Special Envoy Mitchell, who will visit the region next week, will not bring guarantees to the Palestinians on an Israeli settlement freeze, the future of East Jerusalem, or US recognition of a future Palestinian state.

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Al-Quds reports that the PA denied having any knowledge of the EU's reduction in assistance for the Palestinians. The PA statements came in response to media reports Saturday saying that the EU was conditioning support to the PA with achieving progress in the peace process.

The dailies report that Israeli forces continued shelling the Gaza Strip and threatening a new war on Gaza after a rocket fired from Gaza landed in the Israeli city of Ashkelon.

Saturday, January 16:

The three dailies run front page stories of confrontation between peace activists and Israeli security forces in East Jerusalem's Shiekh Jarrah neighborhood during a weekly protest against the Israeli eviction of Palestinians from the area. In related news, Al-Ayyam and Al-Hayat Al-Jadida run front page stories, with photos, of confrontations between Palestinians and peace activists with the Israeli army near Ramallah yesterday where Israel is confiscating Palestinian land to expand the settlement of Halamish. The papers report that dozens of Palestinians suffered from suffocation after Israeli soldiers fired tear gas at the protestors.

Al-Quds runs a separate front page story citing an interview first published Friday in Israeli weekly Col Hazam with Jerusalem Municipal Officer Yakir Segeb during which he said that "The Palestinians are a demographic threat, while Ellad [the Israeli settlement organization in Jerusalem] is doing a good work, and dividing Jerusalem is a catastrophe."

Al-Ayyam runs a front page story on Jewish extremists performing religious rituals at Al Qattanin market close to the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, where the Israeli police forced Palestinian shops to close to avoid any confrontation between the two sides.

Al-Ayyam and Al-Hayat Al-Jadida run front page stories quoting sources in Paris warning the international community, including the US, that the EU will condition its support to the PA with achieving progress on the peace process.

BLOCK QUOTE:

Veteran analyst Hani Al-Masri, writing in Al-Ayyam under the title

"What Does Abu Mazen Rely On?" opines that despite US and international pressure, President Abbas was able to stick to his position of refusing to pursue talks with Israel prior to the full cessation of settlement activities. According to Al-Masri, Abbas has to achieve national unity and end the state of internal Palestinian division in order to defend his positions.

RUBINSTEIN